

“If a single concern arises, it is already action”: A note on Wang Yangming on mental action

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The great Ming philosopher Wang Shouren (王守仁, Yangming 陽明, 1472-1529) influentially proposed the doctrine of “the unity of knowledge and action” (知行合一). A central question among critics of Wang in the tradition as well as among scholars writing today is whether Wang’s doctrine was essentially predicated on a revisionary conception of both knowledge and action. Did Wang take on board roughly the ordinary notions of knowledge and action and argue that they form a “unity” or was at least part of his strategy to offer new characterizations of knowledge and action which made the claim that they form a “unity” more plausible? On the “action” side of this question, attention has been focused on a handful of passages where Wang explicitly states that certain mental events are actions or parts of actions. Scholars have asked whether an expansive conception of action, on which mental events of various kinds could count as “action”, was central to Wang’s doctrine.

In this brief note I aim to make some progress on this question. I consider the most explicit passage where Wang makes a version of the claim that mental events are action, stating, in particular, that concerns (*nian* 念) are actions. The passage states this idea directly, almost forthrightly. But in his landmark study of Wang’s thought (Chen, 1991), Chen Lai has influentially argued that, in this passage, Wang does not in fact claim that all concerns are actions; he claims only that bad concerns are bad actions.

I point to a logical flaw in Chen's reasoning for this conclusion, and argue that we should read Wang as saying what he says, namely, that all concerns are actions. I close with some brief reflections on how this conclusion bears on our understanding of the unity of knowledge and action more broadly.

Let us begin with the key passage from Wang.

[T1] 問「知行合一」。先生曰：「此須識我立言宗旨。今人學問，只因知行分作兩件，故有一念發動，雖是不善，然卻未曾行，便不去禁止。我今說個知行合一，正要人曉得一念發動處，便即是行了。發動處有不善，就將這不善的念克倒了。須要徹根徹底，不使那一念不善潛伏在胸中。此是我立言宗旨。」

I inquired about “the unity of knowledge and action”. The teacher said: “You have to understand my purpose (*zong zhi* 宗旨) in setting forth the doctrine. Today, as people learn and inquire, because they distinguish knowledge and action as two things, when a single concern arises (*fadong* 發動), even though it is not good, if they have not acted on it, they do not eliminate and proscribe it. Now I say that knowledge and action are unified exactly so that people will realize that when a single concern arises (*fadong*), it is already action. If when it arises (*fadong*) it has something that isn't good in it, then you must overcome this bad concern. You must be thorough. You cannot let the badness of that single concern lie hidden in your breast. This was my purpose in setting forth the doctrine.” (*Instructions for Practical Living* (hereafter “IPL”) 226, Wu *et al.* (2011, p. 109-110) (hereafter “QJ”), translation mine)

My discussion will focus on the underlined sentence in the translation, which is printed in boldface in the Chinese. I note that the word I have translated “concern” (*nian*) could also be translated as “thought” (as Chan (1963, p. 201) does here); in translating it as “concern” I have in mind English expressions like “his concern was to stop the onslaught”, or “he was concerned to help her”. But nothing will turn essentially on this translation below; I will not be making substantive points about the notion of *nian*, only asking whether Wang should be understood to say that they are indeed actions here.¹

¹There is some question whether the phrase *yi nian* 一念, which I have translated as “single concern” should here be understood as a technical term in this passage. In some

In his important discussion of this passage, Chen Lai writes:

On the basis of this [viz. text] many scholars think that this one passage “when a single concern arises it is already action” is the sole purpose of the theory of the unity of knowledge and action. They think that Yangming’s theory of the unity of knowledge and action can be summed up as “when a single concern arises it is already action”. But this view is mistaken. We know that Neo-Confucian (*li xue* 理学) ethics separates moral cultivation into two components: “doing good” and “eliminating bad”. If we look at the passage from this perspective, the proposal that when a single concern arises, it is action has directly positive effects in correcting the view that “if a single concern arises, even though it is *not good*, if they have not acted on it, they do not eliminate and proscribe it”. But on the other hand, if this “single concern arises” and is not a bad concern, but is a good concern, then can we really say that “if a single concern arises and is good, then it is performing a good action”? If people only rest on the goodness of their intentions, and do not at all put those intentions into societal action, wouldn’t this be exactly the “knowing without acting” that Wang Yangming wanted to criticize? Clearly this statement – that if a single concern arises it is already action – only reflects one component of the unity of

passages, Wang clearly uses it in this way, most obviously in the set phrase “one-concern *liangzhi* (一念良知)” (e.g. in *IPL* 139 *QJ* 56; *IPL* 162 *QJ* 76). In these passages, Wang seems to be imagining people *singlemindedly* set on a positive goal, and I think “singleminded” might be a good translation. One might thus wonder whether *yi nian* should here not be translated as “single concern” but as something more like “singleminded concern”. It is certainly interesting that we find this expression consistently not only in this passage, but also in others which appear to be variant records of the same conversation (or, minimally, very closely related ones): in *QJ* 32.1292-3, [Shu & Zha \(2016, p. 323\)](#), and in the 續傳習錄 [Shu \(2017, p. 2090\)](#) (with [Wu \(2018, p. 16\)](#)). And it is certainly true that Wang’s disciples, most notably Wang Ji (王幾, Longxi 龍溪 1498-1583), elevated the notion of *yi nian* to an almost mystical status. But still, my own view is that we should take the expression here to simply mean “single concern”, emphasizing that even if one concern arises, that is enough to be action. This same translation seems appropriate to me also in, e.g. *QJ* 1070, [Chan \(1963, p. 278\)](#). But this view of mine will not be important below, and the reader may take the term in a more technical sense if they prefer to.

knowledge and action; it only applies to “eliminating the bad”, and does not apply to “doing good”. Yangming’s thought about the unity of knowledge and action therefore cannot be distilled as “if a single thought arises and is perturbed it is already action”²

In a later passage, Chen clarifies and expands on his conclusion:

Looking at the matter in this way, the sentence in the recorded conversations should be “if a single concern arises *which is not good*, it is already action”. This indicates that, speaking from the perspective that if one knows what is not good, but does not really eliminate what is not good – that is, speaking from the perspective of “eliminating bad” – knowledge is action. But speaking from the perspective of “doing good”, only if one acts will it be knowledge.³

Chen’s goal in these passages is primarily to argue against the idea that the whole of the doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action *centers* on the claim that mental action is action. His main argument for this conclusion is that, if this were correct, Wang’s doctrine would not offer a way of accounting for the positive side of ethical development or training. I will return to this idea in a moment. But I want to begin with a different aspect of Chen’s discussion: his argument that Wang’s dictum does not apply to all concerns, but only to bad ones.⁴ It is this latter claim about the metaphysics of action and mental events – rather than Chen’s argument about

²Chen (1991, 106-7), translation mine, emphasis his. The original reads: 很多学者据此认为阳明关于“一念发动即是行”的这一段话是知行合一说的唯一宗旨，认为阳明知行合一的学说可以概括为“一念发动即是行”。这种看法是有问题的。我们知道，在理学的伦理学中把道德修养分为“为善”和“去恶”两个方面，从这个角度来看，提出一念发动即是行，对于矫治“一念发动虽是不善，然却未曾行，便不去禁止”有正面的积极作用；然而，如果这个“一念发动”不是恶念，而是善念，能否说“一念发动是善，即是行善”了呢？如果人只停留在意念的善，而并不付诸社会行为，这不正是阳明所要批判的“知而不行”吗？可见，一念发动即是行，这个说法只体现了知行合一的一个方面，它只适用于“去恶”，并不适用于“为善”，阳明的知行合一思想显然是不能归结为“一念发动即是行”的。

³Chen (1991, p. 108), translation mine, emphasis his. The original reads: 这样看来，语录的那一句话应当作“一念发动不善即是行”，指知不善而不著实去其不善而言，即对于“去恶”而言，知即是行；而对“为善”而言，行才是知。

⁴Similar points are made by Yang (1997, p. 209) and Zhang (1997, p. 329).

the prospects of a particular form of moral cultivation – that has attracted the most scholarly attention. For instance, in a discussion which is rightly influential in its own right, Lee Ming-huei responds to Chen by arguing that the good concerns Wang has in mind are those which proceed directly from *liangzhi* and that these do have the power to generate real, physical action, so that Wang’s claim that all concerns are actions is reasonable (Lee (1994, p. 434-5), cf. for a related idea Zheng (2018, p. 15)). Or, to take another example, in an important paper, Huang (2017, p. 76-78) offers a qualified defense of Wang’s claim here, on the basis of the relationship between desire and action. Or, to take yet a third example, in his recent book, Chen Lisheng offers textual and historical arguments against this claim of Chen Lai’s (Chen (2019, p. 133-4)).

Chen’s argument for the claim that not all mental events should be considered actions is as follows:

1. Not all good concerns are good actions.
2. So, not all concerns are actions.

The main aim of this note is to observe that this is not a valid form of argument.⁵ To see this, consider the following parallel argument:

1. Not all good poets are good people.
2. So, not all poets are people.

In this parallel argument, it is clear that the premise can be true and the conclusion false. Even supposing that all poets are people (setting aside possible claims of computer or clever parrots to the title) it would not follow that all good poets are good people. So the form of Chen’s argument is not valid.

⁵Chen’s argument of course concerns the interpretation of Wang, not his own understanding of concerns or actions, so perhaps it would be more proper to preface each of the premises with “Wang holds that”. But for ease of exposition I will omit this qualification, along with extra premises that would be required to produce a valid argument once the qualification is added.

The same point can be made for the original argument. Even supposing that all concerns are actions, it does not follow that all good concerns are good actions. Perhaps what makes a concern a good concern is its content, but whether that good concern counts as a good action depends on further features of it, for example, whether it is accompanied by physical action. We can accept the premise of Chen's argument, that not all good concerns are good actions, while nevertheless rejecting his conclusion.

In short, Chen's argument does not provide a basis for challenging the claim that concerns are actions. Since Wang says explicitly in our passage without qualification that a concern is already action, there is a strong case for believing that he accepted it.⁶

In closing, I want to comment on how this observation bears on, but does not settle, two broader questions: first, whether the unity of knowledge and action can be summarized as the claim that concerns are actions; second, whether Wang himself proposed a revisionary conception of action.

My main observation does not point one way or the other with respect to the first of these questions, which was also Chen's main question in the passage above: whether the unity of knowledge and action can or cannot be summarized as the claim that concerns – and other such mental events – are actions. On the one hand, my conclusion is good news for proponents of the idea that it can be summarized by this claim. If Wang did not endorse this claim, getting students to recognize that it is true would not plausibly have been Wang's main goal in proposing his doctrine. My argument that Wang did endorse the claim that concerns are actions should thus be welcomed by those who see this claim as central to Wang's doctrine.

On the other hand, it does not follow from the fact that Wang held that all concerns are actions, that he held that this claim was central to his doctrine of the unity of knowledge and action. And in fact my main observation does not on its own offer a response even to Chen's own argument against the centrality of this claim to the doctrine. Chen claims that it could not be cen-

⁶Further support comes from related ideas in *IPL* 132, *QJ* 47, as well as in variants of our present passage: *QJ* 32.1292-3, with [Shu & Zha \(2016, p. 323\)](#), and a variant in the *續傳習錄* ([Shu \(2017, p. 2090\)](#), with discussion by [Wu \(2018, p. 16\)](#)).

tral to the doctrine – even if it is true – because it would not help students to do good. This fuller argument requires something like the premises, first, that Wang saw the unity of knowledge and action as addressing both of these aspects of ethical development, and, second, that he understood doing good and eliminating bad as different aspects of ethical development. Both of these further premises can be reasonably denied on the basis of the texts. My own view is that Chen’s conclusion is roughly correct, but that his argument for it is not compelling. In my view, the claim Wang makes here does capture one key aspect of the therapeutic content of his doctrine – the sense in which it is “medicine to treat a disease” (對病的藥 IPL 5, QJ 5) – but it does not capture all of the therapeutic content of the doctrine, and that it also does not describe the theoretical content of the doctrine (for discussion of the distinction see [Lederman \(2020\)](#)). But my goal here is neither to defend one or other of these responses to Chen’s further argument, nor to develop my own view in any detail: I have only wanted to clarify the (limited) extent to which my main observation bears on this important question.

How does this observation bear on the second question, about the extent to which Wang’s doctrine was predicated on a revisionary conception of action? The answer depends in part on how we understand “concerns” *nian*. It is fairly uncontroversial that some mental events – for instance, actively focusing on something – can be thought of as actions, deserving of praise and blame. But it is highly controversial whether other mental events – for instance, believing something – can be thought of as actions; they are often said to be things that happen to a person, not things the person does. If one holds that concerns belong to the second class of mental events, then it follows from the main observation of this note that Wang did endorse a revisionary conception of action – though it remains open whether this conception was central to his doctrine. If on the other hand, one holds that concerns are naturally thought of as actions, then it does not follow from the main observation of this note that Wang endorsed a revisionary conception of action – though it remains open that other texts might show that he endorsed such a revisionary conception. In my view, then, a great deal

hangs on the substantive understanding of *nian*, and I hope that this note will inspire further work on this important issue.

Here, however, my goals have been more modest. I have sought to make a small step forward, by clarifying that, since it does not follow from the claim that all concerns are action, that all good concerns are good actions, we have every reason to take Wang at his word, and to attribute to him the view that all concerns are actions.

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